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WRITTEN STATEMENT

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TO THE

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
U.S. HOUSE VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

ON THE

**HOMELESS VETERANS' REINTEGRATION PROGRAM
REAUTHORIZATION ACT (H.R. 474)**

March 24, 2015

Dear Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for holding this hearing on proposed legislation to help increase access to critical employment and education benefits and services for America's veterans. Easter Seals is a leading non-profit organization that assists veterans, military families, and others to reach their potential and succeed in their communities by providing and connecting them to local services and supports. Easter Seals lends our support to Chairman Wenstrup's Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Programs Reauthorization Act of 2015 (H.R.474) and we ask that the Subcommittee consider minor changes to help improve delivery of services to veterans who are homeless or at-risk of homelessness.

The U.S. Department of Labor's Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP) helps to ensure veterans who are experiencing challenges, including unemployment and homelessness, can access the specialized job training and local supports they need to bounce back and find meaningful employment.

HVRP is the only federal nationwide program focused exclusively on the employment of veterans who are homeless. Through the program, community-based organizations, including non-profits and faith-based groups, provide job training, counseling, and placement services to help homeless veterans reintegrate into society and the labor force. Easter Seals affiliates operating in six states operate eight HVRP grants, including two focused on assisting homeless female veterans. HVRP exemplifies the community-based, public-private partnership required to help veterans overcome obstacles and successfully reintegrate into civilian life.

Easter Seals has seen first-hand the transformational impact HVRP and its federally-funded services have on Americans who have honorably served our nation.

Shaneece, a young woman from New York who served in the U.S. military, got her life back on track as a result of the support services and employment assistance she received through HVRP. Shaneece joined the U.S. Army in 2011 “eager to serve” and worked as a generator mechanic. Her plan to temporarily move back in with her parents after she completed her military service unraveled due to complications at home. With no options, Shaneece used her car as a home—using the back seat as her bed and the trunk as both a dresser and filing cabinet to store clothes, blankets and her military papers, including her DD 214 separation documents. Despite the sub-zero weather, she slept in her car at night and filled her days looking, unsuccessfully, for jobs. After many nights on the street, she visited Easter Seals in New York City. She had run out of options and heard Easter Seals could help. “I felt so hopeless,” Shaneece remembered, “you feel like you have no more support. I was working hard but still coming up short.”

Easter Seals specializes in person-centered services to help individuals thrive in their communities. Our New York affiliate operates HVRP grants in Syracuse and throughout New York City, including one focused on helping homeless female veterans connect to employment and other services. Through HVRP, Easter Seals New York implements a team approach to provide each veteran with the wrap-around services they need to return to employment. Shaneece came to Easter Seals with multiple barriers. She was street homeless, had low self-confidence, and had no prospects for employment. As part of the team approach, an Easter Seals case manager immediately went to work to get her situated for the night in a temporary shelter. At the same time, an Easter Seals social worker helped her apply for and receive the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits she earned during her military service and an Easter Seals employment specialist worked with Shaneece to update her resume, including translating her military experiences into civilian language. Shaneece received a call-back for an interview for a job that she eventually won. She works full-time as a program support assistant for a VA center in Brooklyn helping other veterans during their reintegration. “I feel like I’m a different person. I’m a more improved individual,” Shaneece said. “I see myself going places. I’m grateful for the help Easter Seals has given me.”

Shaneece is one of about 17,000 homeless veterans in nearly 150 communities across the country who benefit each year from HVRP services. In addition to Easter Seals New York, Easter Seals operates

HVRP grants in Oregon (Jackson, Josephine, Marion & Polk Counties and the cities of Medford, Grants Pass, and Salem), Indiana (eight county area in central Indiana) and in Washington, DC and the surrounding Maryland (Baltimore, Prince George's and Montgomery Counties) and Virginia region (Arlington, Fairfax, Loudoun, and Prince William Counties). HVRP is successful due to the holistic, individualized care coordination model that recognizes veterans face multiple barriers to securing a job and maintaining stable housing. HVRP's intensive, hands-on, veteran-centered approach is critical and not found in traditional job training and employment programs. The Department of Labor noted in a congressional [budget justification](#) that "helping homeless veterans requires a substantial amount of outreach and job development with employers as well as the coordination of individually tailored support services and training interventions." Nationwide, HVRP has been an important tool in helping to decrease veterans' homelessness by 33 percent or 24,837 veterans since 2010 (HUD/VA [report](#)). H.R. 474 would provide certainty that this proven veterans program will continue by reauthorizing HVRP through FY 2020. In addition, H.R. 474 expands the definition of who is eligible for the program to include veterans who are transitioning from being incarcerated and veterans participating in the VA supported housing program.

Easter Seals supports the changes proposed in H.R. 474 and recommends other minor updates to help improve implementation.

Expand Eligibility of HVRP Services:

In addition to the eligibility expansions contained in H.R. 474, Easter Seals recommends that HVRP eligibility be expanded to include all National Guard and Reserve members who have honorably served, regardless of their activation status. The current HVRP definition of veteran only allows Guard or Reserve veterans who were activated or who have a service-connected disability to access HVRP services. In 2014 testimony, Easter Seals shared a story of a homeless woman who approached our local affiliate after honorably serving in the U.S. Army National Guard. Because her Guard unit was never activated or deployed during her six year military career, she could not access HVRP services. Easter Seals was able to assist her through a separate program we offer but she could have benefited greatly from the supportive services available through HVRP.

Easter Seals Recommendation: As H.R. 474 advances, we encourage you to amend Sec. 3 (Clarification of Eligibility for Services) to include at the end of the section the following:

"(4) all veterans who have been honorably discharged from the National Guard and Reserves."

Include Greater Flexibility to Address Individualized Needs of Veterans:

While HVRP has been successful in reducing veteran homelessness, greater flexibility should be given to service providers, on a case-by-case basis, to more effectively address the unique needs of homeless veterans or veterans who are at-risk for homelessness. Easter Seals appreciates the need for uniform program guidelines to better manage and oversee a grant program. But the reality is that veterans who

seek help in finding stable housing or a job come to these programs with very unique needs that don't always fit nicely within the parameters of the program. Shaneece, the young woman living in her car in New York, could have benefited from greater HVRP flexibility. HVRP can be used to pay for temporary transportation expenses to help participants get to job interviews and work. Shaneece was living in transitional housing on Staten Island when she secured her job in Brooklyn. The quickest route to get Shaneece to her job is by car. The program would not allow Easter Seals to fill her E-Z Pass card to temporarily cover toll fares along her route but would allow the purchase of transit cards to cover ferry and subway fares, which would have greatly increased the length of her work commute. In most cases, public transportation is the best and preferred option. However, this was a unique situation where driving to work was the better option. One delay in her car-boat-train-bus commute could have impacted her ability to get to work on-time and remain employed.

Easter Seals Recommendation: As H.R. 474 advances, we encourage you to add the following report language:

"The Committee recognizes the individualized barriers and unique challenges faced by veterans who are homeless or at-risk of homelessness. As such, the Committee provides the Secretary of Labor the authority to waive a rule, on a case-by-case basis, if a waiver greatly improves the veteran's ability to find stable housing and to become gainfully employed."

Create Service Delivery Efficiencies through Multi-Community and Regional Awards:

The Department of Labor awards single community grants to non-profits and faith-based organizations. Four Easter Seals affiliates operate eight separate HVRP grants in individual service territories. Despite the fact our affiliates represent the same Easter Seals family, the current HVRP structure does not foster systematic collaboration or coordination among these otherwise connected entities. The organizations that operate on the same program cycle could find themselves in competition with each other in future grant completions. Easter Seals believes multi-community or regional grants would promote service delivery efficiencies and best practice sharing. Demonstrating the use of regional grants to national non-profits is consistent with authority Congress recently gave to the Secretary of Labor in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (Public Law 113-128). Section 169(b) of that law grants the authority to conduct regional projects to develop and disseminate best practices and models for implementing employment and training services and address the employment and training needs of specialized populations. A similar model is in place through the Department of Labor's Senior Community Service Employment Program. The multi-community or regional grant model encourages and fosters regular coordination while also maintaining local autonomy to meet unique community challenges.

Easter Seals Recommendation: As H.R. 474 advances, we encourage you to add the following report language:

“The Committee recognizes the role of HVRP in decreasing veterans’ homelessness by helping homeless veterans or veterans who are at risk of homelessness through job training, counseling, and placement services. The Committee directs the Secretary of Labor to conduct a pilot to demonstrate the use of regional, multi-community awards to national organizations to test service delivery efficiencies and to improve outcomes.”

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on H.R. 474, a bill to improve and extend DOL’s Homeless Veterans’ Reintegration Program. Easter Seals is proud of its partnership with the Department of Labor to create veteran success stories, like Shaneece, through job training, counseling, and placement services. We urge this Subcommittee to quickly advance H.R. 474 with Easter Seals’ recommendations. Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to working with the Subcommittee on H.R. 474 and other legislation to increase access to community-based services and supports for our nation’s veterans.